

**ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA AND THE CRISIS OF
SUBSISTENCE: THE ALMAJIRI'S BOWL AS SYMBOL CONSCIENCE**

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A PAPER FOR
NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BEGGING
AND DESTITUTION
AT AREWA HOUSE, KADUNA, NIGERIA

5th – 7th September, 1997

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Bismillahir - Rahmanir – Rahim

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Islamic Education, a term whose delineation⁽¹⁾ may not be as facile as it may appear, originated from Qur'anic education. The Qur'an has been the ocean from which its confluence emanate. In the memorable⁽²⁾ declaration of Suratul An'am: "nothing have We omitted from the book"⁽³⁾ The Qur'an as foundation of knowledge, also symbolizes all previous Scripture and represents a reality beyond them. It is also the source of the disclosure that Allah (S.W.T) "taught Man just that which he knew not". Because it is the origin of knowledge, the Prophet Muhammad (S) wanted its presentation through memorization and documentation to take precedence over everything else including the recording of this ahadith⁽⁴⁾. It was a total initial focus on Qur'anic education in terms of its preservation and reflection of its value. This total concentration on the Qur'an at the early stage of all learning, was subsequently transmitted by later generations of Scholars. They regarded learning the Qur'an as the first task of every properly educated child since the Qur'an was unanimously regarded as the key to the Ulum al-ala, the Core Sciences of fundamental priority, coming before all of them. The Northern Nigerian tradition of setting up Qur'anic schools to teach children to memorise the Qur'an while automatically alongside it teaching the Qur'anic values is not an isolated innovation. Whatever shortcomings may be

observed in its present manifestation, by some people, in its fundamentals essence, it goes back to that same tradition established by the Prophet(s) and imitated all over the Muslim World.

It was the focus on the learning of the Qur'an that brought about further discipline as its footnotes. Thus Hadith, Fiqh, the natural Sciences, History, Medicine and other discipline emerged as elaborations of the Qur'an. Sometimes these elaborations took form of Qur'anic exegesis and others as independent texts but obviously inspired by the desire to elaborate Qur'anic postulates. Even the Arabic language owes its development to the need to understand and explain the Qur'an, the inimitable model. The centre of learning that emerged as a result of imparting these Qur'anic and other sciences were never starved of subsistence needs.⁽⁵⁾

On the whole they were supported by Caliphs, the Waqf system and wealthy individuals. Scholars were commissioned and schools were funded to spread the science inspired by Islam without pushing these Scholars and their support team to the precipice of destitution let alone bowl flashing in search of subsistence.

In the Umayyad, Abbasid and other periods scholars were revered and given encouragement and economic support to continue imparting knowledge through teaching and writing, very often many of them would be invited to take up high official positions in the state machinery. Some would accept and others would regard such offers as disruptive of their primary assignments of teaching and writing and would decline the appointments. It is this attitude to Islamic education, that made the Muslim world at certain times, the centre of light in a global horizon of darkness. It was the Muslim world that gave much of the world its intellectual path and rediscovered intellectual heritages of great many other nations such as the Greek intellectual tradition and quite a few other unexplored cases.

It was the coming of Islam that brought Islamic Education to Northern Nigeria. When Islam came to the region through Kanem Borno. Islamic education took the same format of initial Qur'anic. The Qur'an was the springboard from which all else was explored. It is the first ideal port of call for anyone trying to be educated. Its memorization and identification with its values were the first priorities. When Islam first came to Kanem Borno it was practiced for sometime before it acquired official status as the rulers adopted it and undertook to spread it. The following quotation from an 11th century historical document recording the acceptance of Islam by rulers of Kanem Borno and their registration in the Qur'anic School of Muhammad Ibn Mani shows both, the syllabus of the earliest Islamic Education and the worthy recompense for and sustenance of these Qur'anic Schools and the teachers:

“King Bulu read with Muhammd Ibn Mani from Tabarah... dawn to Minal Jinnati Wannas. Bulu gave his teacher fifty Camels. King Arsi read from Yasin to Wannas, and gave him Sxty Camels. King Kade Ibn Anu (Shu Ibn Arki) read from KHYAS to Wannas and gave him seventy Camels. Abdul Jalil (Jil b. Huwa) read from Surah al-araf onwards and gave him eighty Camels. Mai Umme read from Baqara to Wannas. Then he read the Risala twice and gave Mani One Hundred Camels, One Hundred pieces of gold, one hundred slaves, all because of the reading and instruction derived from him. Mai Umme and Muhammad Ibn Mani spread Islam to last till the day of judgement. The goods of Muhammad Ibn the first, are haram till the day of judgement”.⁽⁶⁾

This eleventh Century document is an exemplary foundation of early Islamic education. The functions of the main agent of Islamic education in the document, Muhammed Ibn Mani, were clear. Furthermore, his function were not without recompense. There were material correlation that guaranteed the continuous survival of his Qur'anic school. Islamic education was budgeted

for by the state from the support Ibn Mani consistently received in material and moral terms. The system of support did not end with the immediate material recompense, but the continuous security and economic independence of Ibn Mani were guaranteed by the issuance of a *Mahram* in his favour which institutionalized his continued support. The *Mahram* was a kind of certificate of merit carrying along with it tax exemption, economic support and other privileges.

It was upon these early foundations that a system of Islamic education with a dignified and secure role for the teachers was established. The centres run by the Qur'anic teachers often had their residential and educational facilities for the student this was the *Sangaya* set-up which still residually survives in Borno and other places with much reduced effectiveness. These Qur'anic learning centres called *Sangayas* were a stable set-up with volunteers undertaking their feeding. Usually in the neighbourhoods around them feeding is regularly arranged. Students did not have to go about begging for basic sustenance as the society knew its responsibility: its children are educated in these centres and it therefore supported the centres accordingly.

The primary initial focus of the Qur'anic learning centres is the memorization of the Qur'an. The arrangement is that the memorization of the Qur'an, hopefully early enough would prepare the child to pursue after Islamic sciences like Arabic grammar and morphology, Islamic jurisprudence, Hadith studies, Literature, Theology among others. As the Qur'an is the orbit around which all knowledge revolves, its initial mastery would make the pursuit of other branches of knowledge more meaningful. Often those criticizing the system by accusing it of solely focusing on memorization of the Qur'an without learning anything else ignore the preparatory purpose of such initial step and the originally conceived idea of early mastery of it to

enable the student to proceed to other sciences. Besides light teaching of other Islamic values always accompanies the memorization process, though often indirectly and informally.

The fact that the initial step of memorization nowadays takes long and often unaccomplished is not due to an essentially wrong principle but the Qur'anic school's loss of status as reflected by its economically poor condition divert the attention of both teachers and students to pursuits that society should otherwise guarantee for them. There are no equivalents of *Mahr* or *Waqfs* for them nor are there such impressive recompense as were prevailing in earlier centuries. The original conception of memorizing the Qur'an only as an initial and preparatory step was obvious from the above cited *Mahram* of 11th Century whereby Mai Umme Jilmi's completion of the Qur'an was followed by rigorous study of Maliki jurisprudence using Ibn Abi Zaid Al Qairawanis *Risala* as the main focus.

In the *Sangaya* traditions the process of Qur'anic education almost automatically encompasses other areas of learning such as the ability to manipulate the Arabic alphabet for writing indigenous languages. In Borno, for example, Kanuri *Ajami* was a by-product of the system, the Arabic script was also used to produce *Ajami* writing in Sokoto and much of Hausaland. The potential interaction between the Arabic alphabet and the indigenous languages could be discerned even from the initial stage of training. Many of the names for the letters have been indigenized. In a cross linguistic interaction for example, in Hausaland some of the alphabet letters have Kanuri names implying early migratory cultural and intellectual interaction within Northern Nigeria. This interaction is also reflected in the discipline of lexicological mnemonics or *haraji* (as it is called in Borno) whereby the terminologies (the *haraji* registers) are indigenized.

The *Sangaya* system in Northern Nigeria had its internal and external dimensions. In addition to internal migratory arrangements within Northern Nigeria many students have been sent from Borno to specially arranged hostels in Fustat in Egypt and the famous Riwaq Borno in Azhar University, which was a hostel for Borno students.

Thus in a system of Islamic education with the establishment of *Sangayas*, foreign scholarships and internal migrations within Northern Nigeria, a virile Islamic educational system was established with the *almajirai* constituting the core of the *Sangaya's* environment. The term *Almajiri* is from the pair of the twin Kanuri appellation for the Qur'anic student namely *Maajir* and *Fuwura*. The first term comes from the Arabic word *Muhajir* (or al-muj=hajir with the definite article) meaning migrant. It is from the same etymological root that the term *hijira* evolved. The idea behind naming Qur'anic students in Borno as *Maajirs* perhaps emanated from the fact that they were *Sangaya* immigrants migrating there for the sake of Allah. Migrating for the sake of Allah is a phrase very famous in both Hadith and Qur'an.⁽⁷⁾ The term was perhaps borrowed into Hausa from Kanuri in the early days of migration to *Gabas* (Meaning Eastward or to Borno) as Borno lies east of Hausaland. The word *Fuwura* is from *Fuqura* (the plural of *Faqir*, the needy). The term has occurred a few times in the Qur'an in the context of Zakat and the need for Allah and his bounties.⁽⁸⁾ It is also applied to those who have left all else to devote themselves to Allah and are unable to be engrossed in mundane pursuits as it has been cited in the Qur'an.⁽⁹⁾

The term *Almajiri* has very noble origins though its bearer's identity today seems to be subjected to unprecedented humiliation and disgrace. Both his identity and the *Sangaya* system that produced and sustained him were the real guarantors of this region's Islamic identity across the

centuries. Without their preservations of their now despised system there would not have been Islamic identity. The new found post colonial elite's habit of denigrating their status only occurred after they safely preserved and delivered basic Islamic identity to generations of this society before the 19th Century Colonial watershed that reversed not only existing political, economic and cultural trends but even the Umma's attitude to itself.

II

The imposition of Colonial rule in the nineteenth Century on Nigeria and especially after the amalgamation of the various protectorates in the early twentieth century meant that the political system that supported the *Sangaya* system and was in turn fed with ideas by its products could no more co-exist with the new colonial reality. Neither the idea of indirect rule through the Native Authorities, nor the fact that the *Sangaya*'s were not necessarily a subject of direct and immediate closure could hide the fact that the Islamic system of education had been deprived of its political base that nurtured it and budgeted for its continuous existence. The removal of the indigenous Islamic system of governance meant that political, economic and educational sectors of the region's life all had to be controlled and budgeted for by the new colonial regime in accordance with its own vision that was almost in totality transferred to the post colonial elite. The foundation of Islamic culture that nurtured the educational system had thus been devastated in both the Eastern and Western Caliphates of Borno and Sokoto. However, the Islamic Educational system of the *Sangayas* and their extensions refused to totally vanish. They continued to take out educational life inspite of the fact that they were deprived of their support base. They did not only continue to exist under very pathetic conditions and abject poverty manifested for instance, by their bowl – bearing pupils struggling for basic sustenance, but they

also constituted part of the resistance to colonialism. The resistance is manifested in form of boycotting western oriented educational institutions as such institution were not established in accordance with the existing values of society. This was the origin of Northern Nigerian refusal to enthusiastically back the colonial and post colonial school system and consequently the cause of the region's low graph rating in Western educational accounts. When elites criticize the attitude of many parents and Qur'anic school establishment that even today refuse to participate in the primary school enrolment drive by sending their children to the western schools of '*Boko*' caliber they neither understand the origin of such resistance as emanating from noble anti-colonial resistance nor do they try to look for a solution by removing the culturally unacceptable elements in our educational system to try to win the confidence of the Northern Nigerian populace. The Qur'anic schools in the meanwhile, culturally embattled by its prolonged anti-colonial and other subsequent resistance drives continued to face the double burden of deprivation of educational budget from our national resources (a measure necessary for decent sustenance) an ferocious attacks and criticism from at least four fronts like an encircled resistance force besieged by the following sources of attack:

- i. The colonial and post colonial establishments that see the Islamic educational system as a rival tradition constituting an obstacle to establishing an educational system in line with the newly inherited Victorian tradition.
- ii. Non-Muslim opponents of Islam that see the Qur'anic schools as constituting a bastion of Islamic continuity and an obstacle to their anti-Muslim ambitions for the country.

- iii. Secular Muslim elites who were largely educated through western oriented schools and who, while tolerating and at times consulting the Qur'anic school products for various needs, cannot envision a permanent future for the system.
- iv. Islamic organizations that champion the cause of Islam but are embarrassed by the level of poverty and "disgraceful" standard of living in the Qur'anic schools and want a way out but can only attack these schools in the absence of ideas of improving them.

Such opponents have provoked the drafting of government edicts to control Qur'anic schools (as was famous in the North-Eastern parts of the region), establishment of committee to solve the problem (as was the case in Kano State which in May, 1988 produced a "Report of the committee on ALMAJIRAI" in addition to the state's Qur'anic Schools Registration edict of 1985).

III

Apart from the fundamental reason of rivalry as the motive of criticism against the Qur'anic School system, some of the reasons can be classified into three important areas, most frequently cited (a) that the standard in these schools are very low lacking the most basic educational requirements (b) that the system is a breeding ground of juvenile criminals of the streets roaming types and adult criminals of *Maitasine* kind (c) that the system has institutionalized street begging as its permanent mark.

Taking up the criticism of the Qur'anic system because of the falling standards the following fact should be noted. It is true that the standard of these schools have fallen and are below the original expectations of their establishment. But it must be taken into account that it is an

educational system that has survived in spite of the fact that it has been excluded from educational budgeting; for these schools to survive at all without the multi – Billion Naira budgeting enjoyed by the Western oriented schools, is not a minor achievement. Moreover the *Boko* system which has enjoyed continuous budgeting has not shown high standards. The standard of education in all stages, primary, secondary and tertiary have fallen to a disastrous level. The budgetless survival of the Qur’anic schools is at least a less worthy phenomenon than the budgeted failure of the western oriented schools. Today very few economically capable elites send their children to government sponsored schools. They either look for private or foreign schools. This is a major crisis which many elite critics of the Qur’anic schools are ignoring. They focus on cheap targeting of an institutional victim of budget deprivation for attacks. Besides these factors, the achievements of these Qur’anic schools are enormous as they have produced exemplary leaders, internationally acclaimed publications and preserved the mainstream culture of Northern Nigeria. These gargantuan achievements are buried by the system’s critics under the pretext of standard fall as if there is some eldorado of ideal standards in the boko educational system.

Another frequently cited criticism leveled against the Islamic educational tradition of the Qur’anic schools is that they are a breeding ground of street roaming juvenile delinquents and adult criminals of *maitasine* proportions. It is true that Qur’anic schools do not constitute a paragon of perfection and have their bad eggs. But bad eggs are neither the monopoly of Qur’anic schools nor does the system per se inherently breed these outcasts. If this were so there would not have been criminals elsewhere. While the Qur’anic schools do have non-exemplary graduates, the system is not intended to be a breeding ground for juvenile delinquents or “Area Boys”. As for adults crimes, while it is true that many criminals, including the favorite example

of critics, the *maitasine* followers did come from the Qur'anic school tradition, neither are these criminals the mainstream products of the Qur'anic schools nor is the western educational system free of criminal products. In fact the multi-billion dollar misappropriation of public funds in modern Nigeria, the endless cycle of corruption in all bureaucratic circles, the loss of hundreds of thousands of human lives in the course of the civil war in Nigeria are all crimes largely committed by Western Educated elites and they are proportionally greater than all the crimes committed by the totality of the graduates of Qur'anic schools from the amalgamation of Nigeria to the present day. Yet no one called for the closure of *boko* institutions because of crimes of corruption, treason or misappropriation of public funds.

Qur'anic schools pupils carrying subsistence bowls and roaming the streets of Northern Nigeria for their basic survival is perhaps the most famous criticism against the Qur'anic schools today. The spectacle of bowl-bearing pupils struggling for survival has tremendously embarrassed the elites and pricked their conscience, filling it often with consciousness of a collective guilt and failure. The street beggars are seen as eye-sore, a pathetic view and, a disgrace to society. This spectacle is what motivated setting up of committees creation of edicts and holding of conferences involving various national and international groups from the 1980s to the present.

Almajirai beggars or *Fuwurawa* beggars as they are known eastward in Borno often reside in the Qur'anic centres for their education but interrupt their studies to search for basic subsistence during meal times. This is what is regarded as the problem requiring solution. But a critical look at the issue is very necessary to avoid a distorted view of society.

The problem is not that these bowl-bearing pupils roam about for their subsistence. The problem is that these are students undergoing education without scholarship or any form of budgeting

from their nation's coffins into which their parents pay taxes with ritualistic regularity. What these bowl-carriers are doing by begging for their basic subsistence needs is finding a low level solution to the problem of lack of scholarship and educational budget. The society that used to regularly provide feeding to the *Sangayas* and the neighbourhoods has abandoned this responsibility, to a large extent in many places. The *Mahrams* and other privileges that Qur'anic studies establishments used to enjoy to be exempted from economic and subsistence humiliation like begging are no more operational as the Nigerian nation has adopted a new set of values. There is no more exemplary quid pro quo for Qur'anic centres for services and sacrifices of transmitting culture to generations of children. Thus the Qur'anic schools and their students have very few options. They chose the most innocent of these options: begging for basic subsistence if they are to survive. But as they device a desperate solution to a problem that neither the post-colonial establishment nor the elite community tried to solve, they are in turn blamed for creating a problem of street begging. The energy of accusation could have been better channeled towards seeking a solution to the problem of sustaining Qur'anic education. Can the non-self-critical elite critics of the innocent bowl-carriers imagine a situation whereby primary school children and teachers are forced to exist without budgeting for the running of their schools? To attack pupils' street begging is like focusing on the symptom of the real problem which is lack of basic sustenance that should be provided. Neither criticism of these beggars nor legislating their disappearance through edicts is a solution to the problem. No one who can enjoy dignified feeding in peace at home will beg for crumbs.

These innocent bowl bearers subjected to the indignity of having to beg for basic subsistence by an insensitive society and post colonial establishment are forced to bear humiliation and low standard of education. Scholarship and sustenance are so basic in all educational endeavors that a

great product of Islamic education and a major pole of human guidance, Muhammad Ibn Idris Al-Shhafi'i cited it as one of the six conditions in which balanced education can be achieved. The other five are cited by him as; a measure of mental ability, motivation, perseverance, proper guidance by a teacher and the necessary time required to learn. Even when most of these are met by the Qur'anic pupils, they are deprived of the basic Shafi'ian sustenance condition.

Society's abandonment of the system that preserved its identity encompasses not only the *almajirai* but also the *Malamai* for the Qur'anic school teachers have also suffered terrible indignity of neglect partly because of society's new found intellectual romance with Western educational culture. If the focus has always been on search for subsistence rather than on blaming the victims of subsistence depravation, there would have been no bowl-carrying pupils. They may not be found even when they are looked for. Indeed a classic condition of Azizian affluence would have been experienced reminiscence of the Archetypical Umar ibn Abdul-Aziz's welfarism and just distribution of wealth whereby his functionaries could no more find zakat worthy destitute to offer alms to.

The simple economic law that the larger the quantity supplied of a commodity the lower the demand for it should not be reserved in the case of *almajirai*. In their case too, the greater the extent of their sustenance the less you see them bearing subsistence bowls in the streets. This is a more cultured approach to the problem. If the elite community is embarrassed and feels guilty because its relative affluence is contrasted with the economic indignity to which these bowls carriers are subjected to, then it should look for an honest and fair solution to the problem of their deprivation. To accuse either the Qur'anic teachers or the pupils for the situation without

assessing the real causes of the plight of both is to misuse the elite position of privilege in a cowardly manner by manufacturing criminals out of victims.

The sight of bowl-bearing Qur'anic students must be interpreted in its proper perspective. These beggars constitute conscience of society. They remind society of its neglected responsibility. Many members of the Muslim elite are fond of elaborately citing that Islam has forbidden begging. With a sense false authoritativeness they wish beggars away without guaranteeing existential correlatives to substitute their display of subsistence bowl-in the streets. Have these elites ever asked themselves whether Islam had given them the licence to expel beggars from the street? Islam has forbidden begging not in the sense of legislating away the victims of begging from the streets but in the sense of zakat and other welfare packages would automatically create abundance that people would not need or feel the urge to beg. It was this system that Umar Ibn Abdul-Aziz implemented to eventually fail to find the alms deserving needy to provide with basic sustenance. Thus the approach of the sharia is that begging is a result of anti-welfarist injustice. To prevent begging, one does not blame its victims but make provisions to alleviate their conditions. The Qur'an consistently warns against humiliating or expelling beggars.⁽¹¹⁾ It also praises the pious who can identify and make provision for the needs of those who resort to the despair of begging as well as those who refuse to subject themselves to the indignity of begging to the extent that many are under the false illusion that they are affluent. The interest of both are protected by the Qur'an because the solution to the problem is not legislating away beggars but creating conditions for them in which they will not need to beg. The sight of beggars in our streets is not an obstacle to development but a symptom of our failure: the failure to implement adequate welfare policies that will make basic sustenance so abundant that people will naturally not need to subject themselves to the indignity of begging. Even if residual

begging prevails after such policies, they will remain residual and transitory. This approach is the real locus of focus.

IV

There is a very crucial fact regarding the nature of begging itself. Beggars, be they of the *almajirai* type or others are under attack because of the affluent bias. Beggars are singled out for criticism inspite of the fact that many others engage in exactly the same activity under different names. Those who engage in the same activity as begging and yet attack beggars include many of the beggar – bashing critics. What then is begging? Begging can be defined as direct or indirect soliciting of resources, goods or consumer items either for basic subsistence as done by the needy or surplus accumulation as resorted to by the affluent; in both cases without paying or rendering return services for the solicited items.

Taking a critical look at the broad constituency of beggars in the light of this definition, one notices at least these categories of white collar and blue collar beggars:

1. There are subsistence beggars who are forced into the practice of begging by the inability to cater for their basic livelihood requirements. They are innocent and hypocrisy – free bowl – bearing beggars for their basic needs. This category includes the *almajirai* of the Qur’anic schools who roam the streets in search of benevolent food donors and the destitute incapacitated by one disability or another from catering for their basic needs. These blue collar beggars are obvious victims of abject poverty.
2. The second category is that of bowl – less beggars who ingratiate themselves with the affluent through sycophancy and often needless flattery in order to induce their clients

generosity. This facile acquisition often incapacitates them with self – inflicted laziness and cannot work hard to secure their needs. Very often their clients, the affluent elites, find them pleasant company worthy of their crumbs. Through exaggerated praises they, cushion their ego and place them on undeserved pedestals. But at times depending on the clients' moral consciousness and the sycophants' capabilities or shortcomings, they are found boring by those from whom they try to extract undeserved material subsidies through gossips, rumour mongering and exploitation of lowly desires. They are at times white collar and at others blue collar beggars.

3. Perhaps the most powerful category of beggars are the institutional beggars. They possess great wealth and have successfully developed adequate lexicon to change the names of their activities to other attractive terms, though they are in reality forms of begging. Because institutional beggars are powerful in society they have not only legitimized their activities but also controlled the lowly vocabulary used to describe other categories of beggars. They find such control necessary to distinguish them from the less wealthy and less influential beggars. Whether their activities are justified or not the simple fact is that they belong to a distinct class of white collar beggars. They include:
 - a. Contractors who visit offices begging for contract not carrying bowls but flashing business cards to seek inflated contracts.
 - b. Fund raising in support of specific cause believed in by the organizers. The fund raisers are directly begging for money to support their causes not always worthy.

- c. Launching ceremonies that only marginally “sell the lunched products”. The real motive is soliciting the deliberate surplus cost often more than a thousand fold the values of the products.
- d. Musicians and various forms of entertainers who claim to provide services which may sometimes be illustrious but constituting utility value in the clients’ view. They, through the provision of these often false services and flattery solicit funds from the audience.
- e. There is another example of institutional begging which largely involves government and organizations rather than individuals as it is mostly the case in the four earlier cited examples. This group includes requests for technical and development assistance, appeals for disaster relief aid and various other institutional begging packages that occur under lexicons like bilateral co-operation, financial assistance, subsidies and so on.

The institutional beggars as can be clearly seen are the most powerful group of beggars who would never use the term begging (except ironically) to describe what they do. They are non-bowl-carrying white-collar beggars whose activities fall exactly within the definition of begging as do the activities of the blue-collar subsistence beggar and the bowless cronies of the affluent clients. The biased perspective of the affluent elite has created blame-worthy and praise-worthy categories out of those who engage in exactly the same activity. They make these distinction between their activity and that of those they insist on calling beggars through an unconscious self exemption from unworthy appellation. The porousness of the exemption can be clearly seen when it is considered that like the blue-collar beggars of the subsistence category they are direct or indirect solicitors of resources, goods or consumer terms either for basic subsistence (which in case of the affluent elite is indexed to their expensive lifestyle) or surplus accumulation which is

the predominant feature in institutional white-collar begging. In their case too, as in the case of the subsistence beggars, the solicited items are not really paid for nor are return services rendered, except for the occasional false services to the donors.

V

While the elites' critique of beggars is elaborate and rhetorically fluent, they fail to balance their criticism by noting their contributions to society especially in terms of transmission of culture. They are victims of a society that has abandoned its responsibilities of fair distribution of national and Zakat resources, and of a caring attitude to the less fortunate. This complex array of economic misfortune and societal insensitivity has rendered them helpless and desperate as they single-handedly look for a solution to the problem of their basic subsistence by resorting barefooted and in tattered rags to their only weapon of survival - the subsistence bowl. This subsistence bowl is a permanent reminder of a neglected duty, a symbol of society's conscience and a permanent agenda of dialogue on the affluent elites' contribution to their plight.

In spite of their under privileged position and limited room for economic manoeuvre, beggars have often tried to reciprocate the killing of their subsistence bowls with genuine return services of morally conscious literary production especially in terms of poetic recitations with highly cultured themes and performances of well known Islamic historical, literary and other compositions. Whether the beggar in Borno is reciting the kayawar epic on the Jihads of the Prophet Muhammad (S) or in the streets of Kano, Kaduna, Zaria and Katsina reciting the Ishriniyat on the great qualities of the Prophet (S) or in Sokoto reciting Shehu Usmanu's poetic sermons, he is transmitting to society a cultural commodity much more valuable than the surplus crumbs from the affluent's home that may fill his bowl. These literary productions are sometimes

in Arabic and at others in indigenous languages. Very often whether the beggar is an *almajiri* of the Qur'anic school or a disabled destitute, he renders such culturally vital services hoping to reciprocate the filling of his bowl. But such services are seldom noticed or acknowledged as worthy contributions. The affluent bias of the elite is such that he appreciates the undeserved flattery and hyperbolic panegyrics of the idle musical entertainer who places him on an unmerited pedestal but abhors the very sight of a needy beggar who will remind him of the great qualities of his cultural ancestor, the Prophet (S.A.W) with a view to inducing his emulation. This is an extraordinary manifestation of cultural decadence and fall of the lowest abyss of insensitivity to the plight of other less fortunate human beings. It is the apex of vain gloriousness. If such cultural potentials of beggars are seriously recognized many of them could be classified as productive individuals who are contributing to the dissemination of our culture. While the *almajiris* deserved a stable sustenance so that they can pursue their education, the disable can also be supported to pursue special education and his cultural reciprocation acknowledged properly and placed in a suitable context. The contempt for beggars because of their low status in society, has blinded many to the fact that they are worthy human beings with potentials that can be explored to advance their position. Their lack of direct economic input in society's scheme of things has misled many to simply dump them with their refuse in an explosive dust bin of history.

VI

A major area of solution to the problem that has given rise to begging by Qur'anic school pupils and other categories of subsistence bowl-carriers, is the recognition that their education has not been budgeted for. While the *boko* educational tradition enjoyed continuous annual budgeting for

its sustenance and spread, the *Sangaya* tradition had been relegated to unbudgeted survival and its activities are not recognized as education. This trend must change if street begging and other negative consequences of the wrong judgement are to be avoided. There was an attempt by the Sardauna government in the 1960s to build limited classroom facilities for some *Sangaya* establishments within their existing premises. There were also subsequent attempts by some state governments in Northern Nigeria to provide paltry funding in unquotably low amounts to some of the schools in the 1970s. More recent efforts were made still by some Northern states like Kano to propose facility provision for some Qur'anic study centres. Many of these efforts were largely symbolic and ineffective. Serious and sincere budgeting in forms acceptable to both the beneficiaries and the funding agents need to be conceived. These schools are contributing to, among other things, the eradication of illiteracy through the spread of reading and writing in Arabic as well as in *Ajami*. Even UNESCO has recognized the importance of a serious planning for promoting the activities of these literacy promotion centres.⁽¹³⁾ The details of budgeting in form of infrastructure, funding and other areas can be calmly negotiated with trusted representatives.

In additions to the fact that the Ministry of Education at the Federal and state levels have major responsibilities in this regard, Ministries like those of Youth, Sport, Culture, Social Welfare and others have important roles to play as the rehabilitation of those affected fall within the activities of their respective Ministries.

Powerful Non-Ministerial bodies like the Family Support Programme also have many contributions to make including the area of identifying female victims of destitution. They can, in collaboration with the Ministries of Women Affairs and other government bodies come to

their aid. The *almajirai* beggars are virtually all male children. But there are various categories of female destitute and area of support for female *almajirai* that the Family Support Programme's terms of reference can address. The Family Support Programme's resource-empowerment could be greatly relevant to the underprivileged if womenfolk in the area of female *almajirai*'s education is addressed.

A part from the existing government Ministries, bodies like the Family Support Programme, there is also a futuristic grouping instituted by government recently, namely the "VISION 2010". This group made up of diverse figures from various sectors of society was given the task of planning for the future of this country up to the year 2010. The planning include many areas of Nigerian life including Education, Agriculture, Economy, Culture, among others. It has a Sub-Committee on the alleviation of poverty which is the organ relevant to issues like destitution and begging. This Sub-Committee along with other Sub-Committee like education can collaborate to look closely into this critical area of Qur'anic schools and their students with a view to helping to improve their status and alleviate the desperate poverty that has relegated many of their students to carrying subsistence bowls.

The burden of solution on the Muslim community is heavy. It must realize that if the injunctions of Islam on welfare of the needy are followed there would not have been neglected subsistence bowl carriers in the streets. The institutions of Waqf and Zakat would have centered not only for the *Sangaya*'s education and subsistence but even other categories of the needy including groups like the economic and famine refugees from neighbouring countries commonly dubbed as "*Sadaka yalla*" in Northern Nigeria. The venom of contempt and beggar-bashing currently in vogue is misdirected since these beggars are victims of need and neglect by greedy with holders

of Zakat. We do not want to give the appearance of romanticizing a perfect and morally spotless community of beggars. There have been several reported instances of imperfection by some of them outside this country. Some of the stories of exploitation of their condition in wrongful manners are appalling. But these criminals represent a minority of the beggars and their overwhelming majority are innocent subsistence seekers forced into street begging by an insensitive community of the affluent whose Zakat withholding crimes are more heinous than all the crimes committed by the criminal minority of the beggars. The Muslim community in its entirety has the great responsibility of restoring Islamic economic values to save these victims of lamentable destitution whose bowl carrying will be a permanent reminder of elite guilt.

Another major area of solution has to do with the recognition of the products of these Qur'anic schools. For example, it is important to start by according the status of a degree holder to one who has graduated as a hafiz, combining retention with phonetic and exegetical components of the Qur'an. The areas of employment can be negotiated with the appropriate circles. Other areas of job creation include utilization of such *Sangaya* products for the purpose of spread of basic literacy in both Arabic and *Ajami*. The development of serious Arabic and *Ajami* press in the North can also provide both employment and publication avenues. Arabic and *Ajami* oriented Computer Centres can also supplement the press. These measures will have the combined impact of greatly improving the standard of life of this important group of society.

The combined impact of these measures will not only help in solving the problem of subsistence in the Qur'anic schools and improve their standards, but even better models closer to the originally conceived ideals of Islamic education could emerge. This generation has a responsibility of resolving this socio-cultural and educational crisis so that future generations

will absolve it from betrayal. It is only when this responsibility is discharged can this generation have a clear and guilt-free conscience for having genuinely done its best to sympathize with the plight of a system that with resilient persistence preserved the core of our cultural identity across the centuries.

NOTES

1. Islamic Education has been a subject of countless and ever growing number of studies. Regular publication series had for example been instituted by the Cambridge Islamic Academy along side its Islamic Education Quarterly Journal. Several conferences have been held around the world focusing on the theme. The Washington based organization, International Institute of Islamic Thought also has a monograph series around Islamic Education viewed in the context of Islamisation of knowledge in addition to its regular journal. The subject has also been scrutinized by several earlier and modern scholars such as Al-Kinani, Al-Zarnuji, Al-Ahwani, Makdisi. In the context of Nigeria, the subject has been treated by too many scholars to be cited: consider our two bibliographical citations as well as Abubakar, Galadanci, Hiskett, Hubbard, Jibril, Alkali. Also consider the NTI Conference report of 1994 as well as Bello and Mai'adua which were party of the NTI/UNICEF Conference on Qur'anic Education.
2. The verse "we have omitted nothing from the book" is in Suratul An'am verse 38. The verse alludes to the all encompassing nature of the Qur'anic discourse.
3. For the verse Allah "taught man that which he knew not" see Suratul 'alaq's fifth verse.

4. Though the Prophet Muhammad(S) allowed the recording of some documents like his correspondence to world leaders inviting them to Islam, the constitution of Madina that he dictated to scribes, treaties like that of Hdaybiya and related texts, he generally did not allow the writing down of his hadith though he always insisted on the spreading of his messages to those absent by those present or as he often put it “let the present convey the message to the absent”.
5. See Makdisi for a discussion of some of these centres of learning and also the systematic Waqf support that institutionalized their continuous existence.
6. For the document see R. Palmer’s Bornu Sahara and Sudan P.14
7. The famous Hadith linking actions with intentions, cited in many collection including Bukhari, also alludes to hijra. The wave of hijra to Madina was motivated by many factors, the most noble one being responding to the appeal of the Prophet Muhammad (S). The Qur’anic praise of migration for the sake of Allah is obvious from many verses including Suratul Nisa:100 “He who forsake his home in the cause of Allah finds the earth many a refuge, wide and spacious.”
8. See for example the Zakat verse in Suratul al-Tauba 60 and Suratul Fajr 15.
9. See for example Suratu al-baqara 273.
10. Muhammad Ibn Idris al Shafi’i listed these conditions in a poetic composition included in his famous anthology, Diwan. For an almost antithetical postulation of the condition see another classical poet cited by Makdisi.

11. See example Suratu al-duha 9 – 11.
12. See Suratu al-Baqara 273. Also see Suratu al-Maarij 24 – 25 whereof both the needy who is forced to openly “beg” for his needs and the one who prefers a more dignified posture despite being in need, are cited as equally deserving beneficiaries of the pious’ alms. These provisions are in addition to the institutional position of Zakat that addresses the needs of various categories of the poor and the destitute as cited in Suratu Al Tauba 69. The consistent position of Islam is that the indignity of need is removed by providing the need of the needy not expelling him from the street or pretending that his needs do not exist by curbing his begging activities.
13. United Nations cultural organ UNESCO had made attempts, following an earlier Harare Conference, to develop modalities of spreading literacy through ajami traditions of the Sahel region. Through its regional office of Dakar, the organization had linked up in the 1980s with some Nigerian Universities like the University of Maiduguri and Bayero University to develop standardized procedures of using Kanuri, Fulfulde and Hausa ajami traditions for the purpose of eradicating illiteracy. The November 1986 Conference in Dakar and follow up activities in Mali and elsewhere focused attention on the issue, though subsequently laxity buried the initial efforts.
14. Similar measures have been adopted in Libya and Sudan which have accorded their hafizs BA degree holding status.

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